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Contextualizing India-Sri Lanka Relations under Modi 2.0: A Framework of Continuity and Change

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Abstract

This study analyses India-Sri Lanka relations during the second term of the Modi government, with a focus on the dynamics of continuity and change in bilateral engagement. It examines key developments such as India's response to Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis, the deepening of strategic and economic ties, and the challenges posed by China's growing presence in the region. While enduring issues like the Tamil question and fisheries disputes remain, the period is marked by India's enhanced regional outreach under the 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Through a descriptive-analytical approach, the study argues that India's policy reflects a pragmatic balance between traditional concerns and emerging strategic imperatives, contributing to a nuanced understanding of regional diplomacy in South Asia.

Keywords: NDA, Modi 2.0, Neighbourhood First, Strategic diplomacy, Economic crisis, Maritime security, Continuity and change

Introduction:

Analyzing foreign policy between two sovereign states within the timeframe of a specific government poses methodological challenges, given the inherently continuous and cumulative nature of bilateral relations. Governmental transitions may introduce policy shifts or strategic emphasis, yet they often operate within established institutional and diplomatic frameworks. This study specifically focuses on the second term of the Narendra Modi-led 'National Democratic Alliance' (NDA) government, which commenced in May 2019, and examines how India-Sri Lanka political and economic relations have evolved during this period. The analysis seeks to identify elements of both continuity and change in bilateral engagement, with particular attention to strategic diplomacy, economic cooperation, and emerging regional dynamics. The foreign policy trajectory of the NDA-II government largely reflects a continuation of the strategic orientations established under its predecessor, with a sustained emphasis on the 'Neighbourhood First' approach that was central to the NDA-I administration. This framework aimed to enhance regional cooperation and foster more amicable ties with neighboring states. In this context, the formation of Sri Lanka's National Unity

Government (NUG) in 2015 marked a significant opportunity for renewed diplomatic engagement with India. Both New Delhi and Colombo demonstrated a mutual willingness to address longstanding concerns and revitalize bilateral relations, particularly in the wake of a strained history marked by three decades of mistrust. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proactive diplomatic outreach toward Sri Lanka signaled a deliberate effort to reset and reconstruct the relationship. This led to an uptick in bilateral cooperation, evidenced by the signing of numerous Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) across diverse sectors such as economic development, science and technology, agriculture, education, nuclear energy, connectivity, and cultural exchange. Nevertheless, while these initiatives indicated political intent, several MoUs—particularly those related to trade and investment—have not yielded the desired outcomes. Structural challenges persist, including the delayed implementation of Indian development projects, strategic anxieties over China's expanding influence in Sri Lanka, and the unresolved issue of maritime disputes involving fishermen from both countries. There are a lot of factors that has become the roadblock to improve the relationship between these neighbour countries. In this study Political and economic factors or relationship has been taken mainly to examined the present status of relationship between these countries under the Narendra Modi government since 2019. This study aims to investigate the policy direction adopted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in engaging with Sri Lanka and to assess its influence on the evolution of bilateral ties. It further explores the key contemporary obstacles that are limiting progress and constraining the potential for enhanced collaboration between the two nations. This study has been done the help of descriptive and analytical method for the convenience of the study author has first taken political relationship and then economic relationship and ended with conclusion.

Strategic Diplomacy and Political Engagement: India–Sri Lanka Political Relations since 2019

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has consistently emphasized the enhancement of political and diplomatic ties with India's immediate neighbours through the articulation of the 'Neighbourhood First' policy, rooted in principles of multilateral engagement, reciprocity, and strategic interdependence. This policy orientation has notably influenced the trajectory of India–Sri Lanka relations. Following his re-election in 2019, Prime Minister Modi undertook an official visit to Sri Lanka in June of that year, signalling India's intent to reaffirm regional solidarity, particularly in the aftermath of the devastating Easter Sunday attacks. His presence was widely viewed as a gesture of support and a reaffirmation of India's commitment to its neighbourhood diplomacy (The Economic Times, June 2019). From a regional geopolitical standpoint, Prime Minister Modi's government has demonstrated a renewed urgency in recalibrating India's relations with smaller South Asian states, driven in large part by strategic concerns over China's increasing engagement in the region. This was further reflected in the swift diplomatic outreach by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who visited Colombo shortly after President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's electoral victory, as well as in India's extension of a \$400 million currency swap facility to Sri Lanka. These actions underscore the Modi administration's prioritization of India's security and strategic interests over normative concerns related to domestic governance or human rights within Sri Lanka. During a high-level meeting with then Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa in New Delhi in

February 2020, Prime Minister Modi reiterated India's long-standing position on the importance of addressing the aspirations of the Tamil population. He emphasized the need for equality, justice, peace, and dignity within a united Sri Lanka, and underscored the significance of fully implementing the 13th Amendment as a pathway to reconciliation. Through these diplomatic engagements, Prime Minister Modi has sought to balance strategic imperatives with normative expectations, reflecting a pragmatic approach to regional diplomacy. In response, President Gotabaya assured that Sri Lanka would not undertake any actions that could threaten the security of the Indian Ocean region. (ORF, September, 2020). In 2021, despite the change in government in Sri Lanka, the release of the Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) paper by the Sri Lankan High Commission in India in August marked a significant development. Designed as a roadmap for the period 2021–2023, the ICS addresses ongoing bilateral issues while also proposing new avenues for cooperation. It offers insight into Sri Lanka's perspective on the current state of India–Sri Lanka relations. The document outlines seven key objectives for Sri Lankan missions in India, including: elevating bilateral ties to a strategic level through political engagement; increasing foreign investment and export revenue; expanding collaboration in strategic affairs, defence, and Indian Ocean security; strengthening partnerships in culture, education, and science and technology; and promoting a more favorable image of Sri Lanka in India through public diplomacy (Dr. Samatha Mallempati, 2021). In 2022, Sri Lanka has been hit by an economic crisis, worst in several decades. With both political and economic challenges in hand, the 22 million population of the island has been going through hard times. There has been emergency declared in the country by the president Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The various antigovernment protest by the demonstrators including attack on the Rajapaksas ancestral home, have forced Sri Lanka's prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksha to resign and make way for unity govt (shriya Mishra, 2022). In 22th July ,2022 Dinesh Gunawardena has been elected as PM after Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as the president. The appointment of President Ranil Wickremesinghe is viewed as a promising moment to deepen and stabilize ties between India and Sri Lanka. India's swift and consistent provision of essential supplies – such as food, fuel, and medicines – during Sri Lanka's economic turmoil has significantly boosted its image and goodwill among the Sri Lankan population. President Wickremesinghe acknowledged that India was the sole country to offer unwavering support throughout the crisis. Given the circumstances, and as India has repeatedly emphasized, it may need to continue assisting the Sri Lankan people until the International Monetary Fund (IMF) finalizes its bailout program, which is contingent upon debt restructuring agreements with multiple international lenders. Meanwhile, India is expected to closely follow developments in Sri Lanka's political landscape and broader efforts involving bilateral cooperation and multilateral aid to address the ongoing economic crisis. In international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Sri Lanka has faced criticism for its handling of human rights violations affecting its minority ethnic groups. In 2022, India chose to abstain from voting on a draft resolution at the UNHRC in Geneva concerning the promotion of reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka, though the resolution was ultimately adopted. Despite its abstention, India emphasized its commitment to collaborating with Sri Lanka and the international community to achieve the legitimate aspirations of the Tamil population alongside the overall prosperity of all Sri Lankans (PTI, 2022)

The diplomatic relationship between India and Sri Lanka—two geographically proximate nations with shared cultural, social, and economic ties—has experienced growing tensions in recent years, particularly due to the recurring issue of Indian fishermen being apprehended or allegedly attacked by Sri Lankan security forces (Deccan Herald News, January 2022). The fishermen issue remains a longstanding and sensitive point of contention between the two countries, despite numerous bilateral efforts to address it. Several rounds of dialogue have been held at both official and community levels to seek resolution (Sultana, 2017). In 2016, under the leadership of Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Maithripala Sirisena, both governments acknowledged the urgency of the matter and institutionalized diplomatic mechanisms such as the ‘Joint Working Group’ (JWG) on fisheries and a dedicated hotline between the Indian and Sri Lankan Coast Guards. The JWG was mandated to meet quarterly, while biannual meetings between the Fisheries Ministers and maritime security officials were also planned (Chahal, 2022).

Despite a series of structured diplomatic engagements and policy efforts, concrete outcomes in resolving key bilateral issues have remained limited. The matter of concern—particularly the fishermen's dispute—has continued to occupy a central place in India–Sri Lanka diplomatic discourse. Prime Minister Narendra Modi brought up the issue during the Virtual Bilateral Summit with the Sri Lankan leadership in September 2020. This was followed by India's External Affairs Minister raising similar concerns during his visit to Colombo in January 2021, emphasizing the need for cooperative solutions. The dialogue persisted in October 2021 during the Indian Foreign Secretary's visit, where New Delhi urged Sri Lanka to adopt a compassionate stance and abide by pre-existing bilateral agreements. Furthermore, both virtual discussions in January 2022 and a ministerial visit in March 2022 reiterated India's call for the safety and swift release of its detained fishermen, underscoring the humanitarian aspect of the issue (Ministry of External Affairs, July 2022). Simultaneously, strategic tensions in the bilateral relationship have intensified, largely due to China's expanding presence in Sri Lanka. Specific incidents have heightened Indian apprehensions, including the death of four Indian fishermen in an encounter with the Sri Lankan Navy in January 2021, Colombo's decision to allow a Chinese firm to implement a hybrid energy project near India's maritime boundary, and the abrupt cancellation of a trilateral ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ (MoU) involving India, Sri Lanka, and Japan for the development of the East Container Terminal at the Colombo Port in February 2021 (Singh, 2021). These events underscore the evolving complexities in India–Sri Lanka relations, highlighting how shared cultural ties and diplomatic engagements are increasingly challenged by strategic and security-related concerns.

Nonetheless, in the face of these emerging tensions and shifting regional dynamics, India recalibrated its approach towards Sri Lanka by deepening defence cooperation, intensifying maritime engagement, and reinforcing humanitarian and multilateral efforts. Since 2019, India–Sri Lanka defence cooperation has deepened significantly, reflecting both continuity in longstanding military ties and strategic adaptation to emerging regional dynamics. Defence engagement included high-level visits, joint military exercises, and naval collaborations. Bilateral mechanisms such as cadet exchanges, capacity-building programmes, and annual staff talks (e.g., June 2019 Army and Air Force talks) remained

crucial in maintaining regular defence dialogue. Symbolic initiatives, such as the familiarization visit of 160 Sri Lankan Armed Forces personnel to Bodh Gaya, reaffirmed India's use of civilizational diplomacy alongside military cooperation (Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, p. 51).

Joint military exercises were central to strengthening interoperability. Bilateral drills included Cormorant Strike and Mitra Shakti in 2019, and continued in 2021 and 2022. Notably, Mitra Shakti 2021 marked the largest-ever exercise by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces with Indian participation. Exercises also extended to naval platforms, as seen in SLINEX-19, SLINEX 2020, and SLINEX 2022, showcasing increasing operational synergy and naval outreach in the 'Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean'. India's deployment of a Dornier aircraft and agreement to establish a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Sri Lanka further signaled a qualitative upgrade in maritime surveillance collaboration. In the maritime domain, fisheries-related issues continued to be both a point of cooperation and contention. From January 2019 onwards, coordinated repatriation of detained fishermen and boats was undertaken by both countries. However, the recurring arrests of Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy – especially those from Tamil Nadu – remained a sensitive issue, drawing political attention in India, such as the Lok Sabha debate in January 2023. Indian appeals for humane treatment and diplomatic resolutions underscored the limits of bilateral engagement on this recurring transboundary concern. Humanitarian operations significantly enhanced India's image as a responsive regional partner. Operation Samudra Setu in 2020, which evacuated 686 Indian nationals from Sri Lanka, demonstrated India's logistical capability and its role as a first responder (Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2020–2021*, p. 130). India's assistance during maritime emergencies—including the deployment of INS Sarvekshak under Operation Sagar Aaraksha II to assess environmental damage from the MV Xpress Pearl incident—illustrated growing cooperation in maritime environmental security (Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2021–2022*, p. 130). In April and May 2022, Indian Naval Ship *Gharial* delivered 760 kg of lifesaving medicines, 15,750 liters of kerosene, and 27 tons of medical supplies to Colombo, demonstrating India's timely support to Sri Lanka during its economic and health crises and reinforcing bilateral goodwill under Mission SAGAR, reinforcing India's position as a reliable neighbour (Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2022–2023*, p. 90).

India–Sri Lanka ties also included multilateral collaboration. The India–Maldives–Sri Lanka Trilateral Table-Top Exercise in 2021 focused on anti-narcotics and maritime rescue, situating the bilateral defence partnership within a wider regional security architecture (Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2021–2022*, p. 131).

Cultural and youth diplomacy added further layers to the relationship. Though certain exchanges (e.g., Shivaji Trail Trek) were disrupted due to COVID-19, high-level visits such as the Indian Air Force's participation in the 70th anniversary of the Sri Lankan Air Force in 2021 emphasized cultural solidarity and symbolic power projection (Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2021–2022*, p. 25). According to Dr. S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister, during his statement in Lok Sabha on 27 July, 2023, informed that India had emerged as Sri Lanka's key strategic partner in the Indian Ocean. During Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe's visit in July 2023, comprehensive bilateral dialogues covered maritime, air, energy, and financial connectivity. Agreements on development in

Trincomalee, digital payments (UPI), and renewable energy marked a shift toward multi-dimensional cooperation. India also raised critical concerns about the Tamil community and advocated implementation of the 13th Amendment, reaffirming its commitment to democratic reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

The evolving geopolitical environment of 2024, particularly growing Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean, further reshaped India–Sri Lanka maritime relations. In a significant policy move aligned with Indian security concerns, Sri Lanka suspended all foreign research vessels from operating in its EEZ for a year. This decision, reportedly unsettling to Beijing, signified Sri Lanka's cautious rebalancing. Subsequent high-level engagements, including Foreign Minister Tharaka Balasuriya's visit to New Delhi and the outreach by JVP leader President Dissanayake, indicated a pragmatic recalibration of Sri Lanka's foreign policy—seeking closer ties with India in trade, infrastructure, and maritime security (Hazarika, 2025). India's timely financial assistance during Sri Lanka's economic crisis, combined with its sustained naval and developmental engagement, has solidified a relationship marked by continuity, increasing strategic convergence, and a shared commitment to regional stability in the Indian Ocean.

Economic Convergence and Developmental Partnership in the Modi Era

India and Sri Lanka have developed a robust and expanding economic and commercial relationship, marked by steady growth across multiple sectors. A key milestone in this progression was the implementation of the 'India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement' (ISFTA) in 2000, which played a pivotal role in boosting bilateral trade volumes (Department of Commerce, n.d.). Beyond trade, the economic engagement between the two countries has evolved into a comprehensive development partnership encompassing critical sectors such as infrastructure, connectivity, transportation, housing, healthcare, education, livelihood, rehabilitation, and industrial development. India not only stands as Sri Lanka's largest trading partner but also ranks among its top sources of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Indian companies have made significant inroads into the Sri Lankan market, with investments spanning various industries. According to data from Sri Lanka's Board of Investment (BoI), Indian FDI totaled approximately US\$ 1.7 billion between 2005 and 2019. In addition to trade and investment, tourism has also served as a vital link in India–Sri Lanka economic relations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, India was the leading source of international tourists to Sri Lanka, with 355,002 Indian tourists visiting the island nation in 2019 alone—accounting for nearly 18.2% of the total tourist arrivals that year (Consulate General of India, Hambantota, 2021). This multi-dimensional economic engagement underscores the depth and resilience of bilateral ties between the two countries. India has significantly expanded its developmental and strategic engagement with Sri Lanka, particularly during times of economic hardship. In 2020, the Modi government extended a US\$ 328 million line of credit for railway infrastructure, renovation of 27 schools in the Northern Province, supply of medical equipment, and the establishment of a surgical unit in Vavuniya's teaching hospitals (Sultana, 2017). Furthermore, India provided financial support through a US\$ 1.1 billion currency swap with the Reserve Bank of India to stabilize the Sri Lankan Rupee and disbursed an additional US\$ 73 million for the acquisition of two offshore patrol vessels, the restoration of the Northern Railway services, the Greater Dambulla Water Supply Project, and other railway lines such as Omanthai-Pallai, Madhu-Talaimannar, and Medawachchiya

(Sultana, 2017). India's strategic presence was further bolstered when the 'Sri Lanka Ports Authority' (SLPA) signed an agreement in October 2021 with India's Adani Group to jointly develop and operate the 'West Container Terminal' (WCT) at Colombo Port—a location where nearly 70% of shipments are bound for Indian ports (Hindustan Times, December 2021). In response to Sri Lanka's severe economic crisis in 2022, India extended assistance amounting to nearly US\$ 3 billion. This aid included a US\$ 400 million currency swap, a US\$ 1 billion credit line for essential imports such as rice and fuel, and the deferment of US\$ 1 billion in loan repayments under the Asian Clearing Union framework. Additionally, under a US\$ 500 million credit facility, India delivered 400,000 metric tonnes of fuel (The Hindu, May 2022). This multidimensional support, reflecting the principles of 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Security and Growth for All in the Region', underscored India's commitment to regional stability and humanitarian assistance. Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe publicly acknowledged India's role during this crisis, expressing deep gratitude: "The Government of India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given us a breath of life... I convey the gratitude to Prime Minister Modi, the government and the people of India" (Business Standard, August 2022).

India continues to be a major economic partner for Sri Lanka, maintaining its status as one of the island nation's leading sources of trade. Reciprocally, Sri Lanka occupies a prominent place in India's trade dynamics within SAARC, underscoring the mutual significance of their bilateral commercial ties. In 2023–24, bilateral merchandise trade reached USD 5.5 billion, with Indian exports at USD 4.1 billion and imports from Sri Lanka at USD 1.4 billion. This robust trade relationship has been supported by Indian Lines of Credit and credit facilities, particularly during Sri Lanka's economic crisis. To broaden economic engagement, talks on the 'Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement' (ETCA), aimed at covering goods and services, resumed in July 2023 after a five-year break, following the visit of former President Ranil Wickremesinghe (Ministry of External Affairs, November, 2024). By July 2024, fourteen rounds of negotiations had been completed, the latest in Colombo, indicating a strong political intent to deepen economic cooperation beyond the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA) (Press Information Bureau, 2024). India's role in Sri Lanka's economic recovery also includes cumulative 'Foreign Direct Investment' (FDI) of around USD 2.2 billion by 2023, primarily in sectors like energy, hospitality, telecommunications, real estate, manufacturing, and banking. According to the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (2022), Strengthening people-to-people ties, direct air connectivity between Chennai and Jaffna resumed in December 2022, and a ferry service between Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai was launched in October 2023, with plans for a Rameswaram–Talaimannar route under discussion. Energy and financial collaboration are also expanding, with proposals for a multiproduct pipeline and power grid linkage under review, and a key digital milestone was marked by the launch of India's 'Unified Payments Interface' (UPI) in Sri Lanka in February 2024, jointly inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi and President Wickremesinghe (Press Information Bureau, 2024). Tourism remains a vital pillar, with India being the largest source of tourists—approximately 300,000 in 2023 (20% of total arrivals) and 320,000 by October 2024 (19.3%)—reflecting the resilient and people-focused nature of post-pandemic bilateral ties (Ministry of External Affairs, November, 2024).

Conclusion:

At the end of this study, it could be said that the bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, economic, and strategic factors. Persistent challenges such as the marginalization of Indian-origin Tamils, the unresolved fishermen issue, and more recently, the strategic encroachment posed by China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), including port-building activities in close proximity to India's maritime boundaries, have emerged as critical concerns for New Delhi. On the other hand, India has exhibited a sustained and sensitive interest in Sri Lanka's internal developments, including its economic and political crises. As the 21st century is often heralded as the "Asian Century", it is imperative that Asian nations resolve their differences through peaceful and cooperative mechanisms. India's approach to the Sri Lankan crisis, particularly in recent years, reflects a departure from the strategic missteps of the 1980s. Instead, it embodies a constructive and harmonious engagement strategy aimed at regional stability. India's proactive support during Sri Lanka's economic downturn—through financial aid, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic support—underscores this shift. However, despite notable improvements in mutual understanding over the past three years, key irritants in the bilateral relationship persist. These stem from narrow domestic political calculations, economic competition, and divergent long-term strategic visions. Therefore, while India–Sri Lanka relations have shown a degree of continuity and positive transformation under the Modi Government 2.0, achieving sustainable bilateral harmony will require constant dialogue, trust-building, and a shared commitment to regional peace and development.

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